



---

**Committee:** House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife & Fisheries

**Event:** [Fix Our Forests for Affordable and Reliable Water and Power Supplies](#)

**Date:** January 8, 2026

---

***Executive Summary:***

On January 8, 2026, the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife & Fisheries held an oversight hearing titled “Fix Our Forests for Affordable and Reliable Water and Power Supplies.” Members from both sides of the aisle agreed that poor forest management has complicated wildfire mitigation efforts, and the panel expressed broad support for reforms outlined in the Fix Our Forests Act ([H.R. 471](#) | [S. 1462](#), FOFA). The panel predominantly focused on the impact of wildfire sedimentation on local watersheds, and how ineffective cleanup of forest debris increases the risks of wildfire incidence near power utility infrastructure.

***Member Toplines:***

*Subcommittee Chair Harriet Hageman (R-WY-AL):* Hageman argued that policy choices have limited forest managers’ ability to carry out site-specific treatments, leading to increased fires, degraded forest health, destabilized water supplies, and reduced capacity to provide reliable power across the West. She emphasized that active forest management reduces wildfire risk, protects homes and critical infrastructure, improves air and water quality, and increases water availability. Hageman concluded by urging the Senate to pass FOFA.

*Subcommittee Ranking Member Val Hoyle (D-OR-04):* Hoyle emphasized the clean water benefits of healthy, well-managed forests. She noted that increasing temperatures exacerbate wildfire conditions, which have negative effects downstream and increase the cost of water treatment for providers. Hoyle advocated for the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program Reauthorization Act ([H.R. 3361](#)).

*Full Committee Chair Bruce Westerman (R-AR-04):* Westerman discussed successful forest management policies deployed in Massachusetts and New York that have improved water quality for consumers. He also argued that the mismanagement of watersheds negatively impacts regional water systems and the power grid.

*Full Committee Ranking Member Jared Huffman (D-CA-02):* Huffman argued that understanding the history of forest mismanagement is critical to developing effective policies in the future. He argued that climate change is aggravating the causes and intensities of forest fires. He voiced disapproval of proposals to weaken the *National Environmental Protection Act* and criticized his Republican colleagues for repealing provisions in the *Inflation Reduction Act* that invested in forest management solutions. Instead, Huffman advocated for a holistic, “science-driven” approach to formulating legislative solutions, including investing in resilient infrastructure, applying targeted thinning where appropriate, and restoring riparian areas.

### **Witness Toplines:**

*Ea'mon O'Toole, Director, Family Farm Alliance:* O'Toole emphasized the role of runoff in the Colorado River watershed and its adjacent communities, noting that increased wildfire activity leads to heightened contamination potential for runoff sources of water. He highlighted mechanical thinning and prescribed fire as potential solutions to minimize impacts to the Colorado River watershed.

*Travas Deal, Chief Executive Officer, Colorado Springs Utilities:* Deal discussed the threat of unhealthy forests in the West, noting that communities heavily rely on water from public lands. He highlighted Colorado Springs Utilities' hydroelectric operations, noting that a single catastrophic wildfire has the potential to harm both electricity production and the quality of local water resources. He emphasized support for FOFA, characterizing it as an "important first step" to support effective preparedness and management. He highlighted FOFA's holistic restoration efforts for priority landscapes, and expressed support for efforts to increase shared stewardship of high-priority potential wildfire lands and watersheds.

*Madelene McDonald, Senior Watershed Scientist, Denver Water:* McDonald discussed Denver Water's historic efforts to bolster proactive forest management and protect local watersheds. She emphasized the need to shift from a reactive to proactive approach to wildfire management, to support cohesive post-wildfire management and preparedness efforts, and to provide consistent funding for long-term watershed programs.

*Randy Howard, General Manager, Northern California Power Agency (NCPA) and American Public Power Association:* Howard emphasized that forest systems deserve active and consistent management. He highlighted three main challenges facing public utilities in fire-prone regions: extensive timelines for federal approvals to remove dead forest material; the impact of de-energizing power lines for regional wildfire coordination efforts and its effect on emergency operations in adjacent communities; and the harm posed by wildfire sedimentation on local water supplies. He expressed support for FOFA, specifically highlighting the legislation's provisions implementing fault-based liability standards and supporting prevention programs.

### **Major Takeaways:**

- Westerman asked the panel what the top thing Congress can do in the near term to address the threat of catastrophic wildfire for utilities in the West:
  - O'Toole highlighted the problematic nature of dead trees for grazing and expressed support for mechanical thinning.
  - Deal emphasized the need for bipartisan funding to bolster fire mitigation efforts.
  - McDonald noted that in addition to passing FOFA, Congress should prioritize adequate staffing and funding for agencies dealing with wildfire response.
  - Howard discussed the importance of implementing categorical exclusions (CatXs), allowing utilities to address dead trees near power infrastructure; he also mentioned post-wildfire CatXs for the rapid reconstruction of power lines.

- Westerman noted that last year, more than 30 organizations – representing 150 community-owned electric utilities – signed a letter in support of FOFA, including NCPA. Westerman moved to add this letter to the record. He asked Howard to explain the benefits of this authority in the House version of FOFA and how its re-inclusion in the Senate version would help make communities near transmission lines safer.
  - Howard stated that the CatX in the House FOFA, which allows utilities to clear dead debris near infrastructure, would allow utilities to prepare to mitigate potential hazards proactively.
- Westerman expressed support for McDonald’s suggestions to bolster proactive forest management. He asked her to discuss how proactive management impacts the costs passed down to customers; McDonald emphasized that proactive forest management will decrease overall cost burdens for families in wildfire-prone communities.
- Hoyle showcased her support for active forest conservation efforts. She asked McDonald and O’Toole to discuss provisions in FOFA that they specifically support.
  - McDonald highlighted that FOFA included a number of expansions for programs supporting proactive forest management. However, she noted that agencies require adequate funding and staffing to execute this work.
  - O’Toole emphasized the need to implement wildfire mitigation efforts at the local level, noting that coordination between federal, state, and local agencies often leads to implementation bottlenecks.
- Hageman argued that the failure to manage federal forests disrupts water and power supplies throughout the West. She asked the panel to describe how overgrown forests and wildfires impact cost of living for ratepayers and utility customers.
  - Deal emphasized the need for CatXs for utilities in wildfire-prone areas, along with increased federal investments in mitigation technologies.
  - Howard noted that unhealthy forest management makes utilities more inclined to turn off power altogether amid extreme weather events, impacting needed community functions.
- Rep. **Darren Soto** (D-FL-09) asked McDonald to describe the bureaucratic barriers she has encountered in Colorado; McDonald noted that Denver Water approaches most mitigation efforts in a collaborative manner, emphasizing the importance of engaging with other industry, state, and local partners. She noted that the limiting resources for current partnerships are mainly funding and staffing.
- Rep. **Cliff Bentz** (R-OR-02) asked Deal to discuss the need for CatXs. Deal argued that utilities must have the ability and authority to rapidly mitigate potential wildfire risks, noting it would increase overall safety and decrease consumer power rates. Howard agreed that CatXs would increase community safety, noting that mitigating wildfire risks would also lower insurance costs for ratepayers.
- Rep. **Debbie Dingell** (D-MI-06) emphasized the importance of watershed services from national forests and grasslands. She asked McDonald to identify the main threats posed by wildfires on watersheds; McDonald noted the most severe harm tends to occur after the fire via water contamination and sedimentation. McDonald emphasized the need to act proactively to decrease the severity of wildfire impacts, as well as the importance of supporting continued, long-term recovery efforts.
- Rep. **Celeste Maloy** (R-UT-01) asked the panel to discuss the challenges they face when working with federal agencies. Howard discussed the challenges around

coordination between the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management, noting that their competing standards have created inefficiencies. He emphasized that FOIA addresses a number of key coordination challenges among agencies. McDonald also shared that Denver Water has been able to use Good Neighbor Authority to support coordination and cross-boundary work.

- Rep. **Troy Downing** (R-MT-02) asked Howard how adverse policies and regulations negatively affect the efficient management and maintenance of a utility's rights-of-way. Howard emphasized the need to give utilities the ability to remove excess dead material near power infrastructure. He also described the impact of sedimentation – exacerbated by wildfire activity – at NCPA's reservoir.